

## The God El and His Attributes in Ugarit

Aslı KAHRAMAN ÇINAR    
Corresponding Author

Yozgat Bozok University, Faculty of Arts  
and Sciences, Department of History,  
Yozgat, Türkiye.  
asli.kahraman@yobu.edu.tr

**Abstract**

*Ugarit is one of the most important ancient civilisations discovered for the history and geography of Northern Syria. While the fact that the royal centre Ras Šamra was an important port city on the Mediterranean coast increased the geopolitical importance of Ugarit, its neighbourhood with great states such as Egypt in the south and Hittites in the north contributed to its cultural nourishment. Ugarit, which is located at a strategic point between the north, south, east and west civilisations in the Mediterranean port, was influenced and affected by its neighbours in many respects due to this location, and the cuneiform tablets show that the most prominent influence was economic and religious. The details of this religious structure in Ugarit, which had a polytheistic structure like its neighbours, are illuminated by the discovery of a large number of religious texts in cuneiform tablets unearthed during archaeological excavations in the region. These texts primarily provide detailed information about the pantheon of the Ugaritic gods, as well as information on different subjects such as the names of the Ugaritic gods, the attributes of the gods, the responsibilities attributed to them, their areas of duty, and the god family. In this study, El, one of the chief gods of the Ugarit pantheon, his figures unearthed in archaeological excavations, his place in the pantheon, his names and attributes mentioned in cuneiform tablets will be discussed. The name El, which influenced the later civilisations in the Canaanite region, will first be examined etymologically and then the adjectives used for him will be discussed in the light of cuneiform texts within the framework of ancient history methodology.*

**Keywords:** Ancient History, Ugarit, Pantheon of Gods, God El, CuneiformTexts.

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## Geniştirilmiş Özet

Kuzey Suriye’de Lazkiye limanının on bir kilometre kuzeyinde bulunan günümüzde Ras Şamra olarak bilinen fakat antik ismi ile Ugarit MÖ 2. bin yılın ortalarında varlığını iki yüzyıl kadar sürdürüştür. Bereketli topraklara sahip olan ve Akdeniz kıyısında stratejik önemi nedeniyle Ugarit şehirleri çevredeki büyük krallıkların dikkatini çekmiş ve MÖ 8. yüzyıldan MÖ 2. yüzyıla kadar işgal görmüştür. Bölgenin en eski yerleşimleri Geç Tunç Çağı’nın ilk evresine aittir. Yazılı belgelerden elde edilen veriler bugün Ras Şamra olarak bilinen merkezin Ugarit’in başkenti olduğunu kanıtlamasının yanı sıra yakın zamana kadar bu bölgedeki en kapsamlı ve çeşitli arşivlerin bulunduğu küçük şehir devletlerinden yalnızca bir tanesidir.

Ugarit dinine bakıldığında dini yapılanmanın bölgedeki diğer medeniyetler gibi çok tanrılı bir sistem olduğu görülür. Panteon içerisinde tanrıların hiyerarşik düzeni, yüce ve aktif olan tanrıların gücü ve daha alt konumda bulunan tanrılar tarafından yürütülen faaliyetler şeklinde belirlenirdi. Genel olarak Ugarit panteonunun yapısı bir toplum ile bürokratik olarak organize edilmiş profesyonel dünyanın bir karışımı olarak düşünülebilir. Sınıfsal yapı içerisinde baş tanrılar ve tanrıçalar, onların yardımcısı olan tanrılar, zanaatkar tanrılar, haberci tanrılar gibi farklı sıfat ve unvanlarda tanrılar bulunur. Bu listeler, Ugarit şehri ve çevresinde çok fazla tanrıya tapıldığını da göstermektedir. Ritüel metinlerine dayanarak 178’i kendisine kurban kesilen toplam 234 tanrı tanımlanmıştır. Tanrılar arasındaki ilişkilerin ise hiyerarşik, akrabalık, cinsiyet veya faaliyetleri yaşam alanlarına göre sınıflandırılan kapsamlı bir bütünlük halinde gelişmiştir. Ugarit dini için tanrılar arasındaki ilişki başlangıçta aile ilişkilerinin de içerisinde olduğu bir hiyerarşi olarak tanımlanabilir. En yüksek tanrılardan biri olarak tapınım gören El ve Aḫīrat (Ašerah/Ašerat) ebeveyn tanrılardır. Öyle ki diğer tüm tanrılar ve tanrıçalar onların çocukları olarak kabul edilir.

Ugarit panteonunun önemli tanrılarından biri olan El’in ismi, Etiyopya dışında Mezopotamya ve Yakın Doğu’da bilinen Sami bir kelime olup “tanrı” anlamına gelmektedir. Etimolojik olarak bu sıfatın kökeni kesin olarak belirlenememektedir. Ugaritçe metinlerde El ismine beş yüzden fazla kez atıfta bulunulur. El, Ugarit panteondaki tanrıların babasıdır. Gücünü sembolize eden “Boğa” figürü/sıfatı ile temsil edilir. Kenan tanrısı olarak El’e atfedilen vasıflardan “kudretli olan”, “kuvvetli/güçlü olan”, “ilk olan”ı temsil ettiği öngörülür. El’in mitolojik unvanlarından biri olan “soyunu inşa eden kişi” yani tanrıların babası olarak anıldığı unvandır. Ugarit metinlerinde bereket tanrısı El değil, baş tanrı Baal’dır. Bununla birlikte “boğa” El için en sık kullanılan sıfattır. Boğa sıfatı antik çağda Yakındoğu’da ikili bir sembolizme sahiptir. Bereketin sembolü olan boğa, aynı zamanda hem tanrılar hem de insanlar âleminde güç, kudret ve savaşma cesaretinin sembolüdür. Güç ve savaşçı sembolizmi, boğa imgelerinin birincil özelliği gibi görünse de birçok durumda imgeler hem doğurganlık hem de kudret anlamına gelen ikili işleve hizmet eder. Ugaritçe metinlerde karşılaşılan bir başka unvan olan Kral (mlk), Tanrı El’in özel bir unvanı şekline dönüşmüştür. El “yaratılmışların babası” olarak vurgulanırken, tahtta oturan ve yaratılmışları kutsayan bir kral tasviri de göze çarpar. El, yaratıcı tanrı, düzenin kurucusu ve koruyucusu olmasının yanı sıra tanrılar arasında açıkça “bilge” olarak adlandırılan tek kişidir. Bilgeliliğin genelde tanrının bir simgesi olduğuna işaret edilse de metinlerindeki bu nitelik sadece El için kullanılmıştır. Bilgelik sıfatı El’e has, ona özgü ve biriciktir. Ugaritçe metinlerde Anat ve Aḫīrat’ın isteklerini gerçekleştiren El’e bilgeliği için şöyle dua ettiği görülür: “El, Senin bilgeliğinle, sonsuz, iyi şanslarla dolu bir yaşam (senin) buyruğundur.” Adalet de El’in bir sıfatı olarak doğrudan belirtilmemiş olsa da bir kralın sorumlulukları içerisinde tebaasına karşı adil olması, dünyaya adalet dağıtması ondan beklenen önemli bir sorumluluk olması nedeniyle El tanrıların babası olarak adil sıfatının yansıması olarak yargıç ismi ile anılmıştır. Keret destanında “El, kırların Attart’ıyla birlikte tahta oturur:/ El, çobanı Haddu ile yargıç olarak oturur, / Şarkı söyleyen ve lir çalan” ifadeleri ile bu sığata vurgu yapılır. El için kullanılan sıfatlardan bir diğeri de “nazik (müşfik)” olarak verilmiştir. Bu sıfatın “(mûnis/içten) babacan bir kalbe sahip olan” kişi şeklinde düşünülmesi önerilir. Yine El için kullanılan bir başka sıfat, “kalp, akıl, dimağ, nezaket/kibarlık” olarak Türkçeye aktarılır. Bu sıfatı, “merhametli El” ya da “merhametin tanrısı” olarak sadece El için sıklıkla da destanlarda kullanılan bir ifadedir. Bu ifade “El’in cömertliği/iyiliği” şeklinde tabletlere yansımıştır. El’in merhametine yapılan atıfların önemini, Arapların hükümdar vasfı olarak gördükleri en yüksek erdem olan “hilm” niteliğinin ona atfedildiğini dile getirir. Fakat bir yandan merhamet ve şefkatin yaşlılık ile ilişkilendirilmesi sonucu bunun bir zafiyet olduğu şeklinde de yoruma açık hale gelir. Çünkü merhamet ve iyilik vasıfları “boğa” sıfatı ile nitelenen bir tanrıyla ilişkilendirilebilecek karakter olarak görülmeyeceği düşüncesi doğmaktadır. El, görünüşe göre yaşlı bir boğadır fakat çok canlı değildir. El, Ugarit panteonunda yalnızca bir tanrı figürü değil, aynı zamanda dini, mitolojik ve toplumsal bir düzenin simgesidir. Onun “boğa”, “baba”, “kral” ve “bilge”, “yargıç” sıfatları hem bireysel hem de kolektif bir anlam taşıyarak Ugarit toplumundaki ilahi otoritenin ve düzenin temsili olmuştur. Bu bağlamda El, yalnızca Ugarit geleneğinde değil, genel olarak Sami mitolojisinde de bir tanrı figürü olarak merkezi bir konumda yer almıştır.

## Introduction

The Syrian coast, inhabited since the Early Palaeolithic, saw the establishment of villages during the Neolithic period. Ugarit, located eleven kilometres north of the port of Latakia in northern Syria and known in antiquity as Ras Şamra, flourished for about two centuries in the mid-second millennium BC (Kinal, 1963, p. 1). Geographically, the city was bounded to the east by the Jabal Ansariye mountain range and to the west by the Mediterranean Sea, with the Bdama Pass serving as its gateway to inland Syria. The mountains blocked easterly winds from the desert steppes, creating a favourable climate. Situated fully within the Mediterranean climate zone, Ugarit enjoyed average winter temperatures of around 11°C and hot summers reaching 30–35°C (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 18).

After its destruction in 1195 BC, Ugarit was forgotten; however, indirect information about the city's existence survived in Hittite cuneiform documents and in the Amarna letters discovered at Hattusa. Like many archaeological sites, its rediscovery occurred by chance when local inhabitants encountered ancient artefacts (Kahraman Çınar, 2024, p. 102). In 1928, a farmer ploughing his field in the Minet el-Beida Gulf struck an object from Ugarit, prompting the landowner to notify the authorities. Charles Vioilleaud, director of the French Antiquities Service in Beirut, was informed and dispatched his colleague Leon Albaese to investigate, later recommending systematic excavations to the Department of Ancient Eastern Temples at the Louvre. As a result, the first archaeological excavations at Ugarit, located eleven kilometres north of Latakia, began in 1929 under French supervision (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, pp. 6–7). Excavations at Minet el-Beida and Ras Šamra continued without interruption until 1935, and thereafter intermittently due to wars and political instability in the region (Van Wijngaarden, 2002, p. 37).

Thanks to its fertile soil and strategic location on the Mediterranean coast, the cities of Ugarit attracted the attention of the surrounding great kingdoms and were occupied at various times between the 8th and 2nd centuries BC (Yon, 2006, p. 1). The earliest settlements in the region date to the first phase of the Late Bronze Age. Written documents confirm not only that the site now known as Ras Šamra was the capital of the Ugaritic civilisation (Klengel, 1965, p. 5; Van Wijngaarden, 2002, p. 16), but also that it was recognised as one of the small city-states in the region with the most extensive and diverse archives (Kuhrt, 2024, p. 393).

Before coming under Hittite rule in the mid-second millennium BC, Ugarit was one of Egypt's vassal states (Kinal, 1963, p. 1). It maintained stable commercial relations with neighbouring powers such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Hittites. Ugarit was also the capital of one of the principal trade centres of Northern Syria, an important port city (Beckman, 1992, p. 43). When Mitanni power in the region weakened under successive Hittite attacks, Šuppiluliuma I (1370–1330 BC) annexed all of Northern Syria as far as Damascus, extending Hittite control southward. In this context, Ugarit also came under Hittite sovereignty, and its archival records began to provide valuable data on the nature of that rule (Kuhrt, 2024, p. 393). During this period, King Niqmaddu II of Ugarit was taxed, and the seals of Muršili II, Hattušili III, Tutḫliya IV, Ini-Tešup, and Talmi-Tešup were found in the city. Ugarit also played an important role in the Battle of Kadesh under Muwattalli II and concluded several agreements with neighbouring states. Moreover, a letter from the king of Alašia to Ammurapi of Ugarit, conveyed by Šuppiluliuma II, warns of an imminent threat to the Hittite state. In his reply, the Ugaritic king reminds him: "Does my father not know that all my war troops are in the Hatti country and my ships are waiting in the Lukka country?" (Karauguz, 2018, pp. 33–34).

The cuneiform documents found at Ras Šamra provide detailed information about the history, society, and culture of the Canaanite state between 1400 and 1200 BC. The great palace archives shed light on the social, political, religious, and cultural life of Ugarit in the 14th–12th centuries, revealing it to have been a remarkably influential and vibrant city during this period (Kuhrt, 2024a, p. 393). These records also show that a thirty-letter alphabet with simplified cuneiform signs was in use for the Ugaritic language (Ramos, 2021, p. 1432).

Turning to the divine world of Ugarit, the pantheon was not organised as a random collection of gods but rather according to categories such as hierarchy, kinship, gender, and sphere of activity. At its core, the pantheon reflected a hierarchical structure that incorporated family relations. El and Aṯirat (Ašerah/Ašerat), worshipped as two of the highest deities, functioned as parent gods, with all other gods and goddesses regarded as their children. The only exception was Baal, who is described as the son of the god Dagan (Olgun, 2014, p. 10; Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 40; Niehr, 1992, p. 293).

The hierarchical order of the Ugaritic pantheon was determined by the power of the supreme and active gods and by the activities carried out by the lesser ones. In general, this structure reflected both a patrimonial society and a bureaucratically organised professional world. The rankings were divided into supreme gods, actor gods, craftsman gods, and messenger gods. Although the lists of deities are relatively well documented, they remain controversial because they also shed light on the organisation of the divine world (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 43). Names and figures similar to those in these pantheon lists were discovered in the "House of the Magician Priest" on the Acropolis. Beyond recording the most important gods, the lists also served a practical cultic purpose—ensuring that no deity was omitted when sacrifices

were offered (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 43; Del Olmo Lete, 1999, p. 310). They further indicate that a great number of gods were worshipped in and around Ugarit. Ritual texts identify a total of 234 deities, 178 of whom received sacrificial offerings (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 43; Pardee, 2002, p. 222).

Thanks to these catalogues, scholars can identify not only the names of the deities but also their relative status within the pantheon. They also make it possible to draw conclusions about the functions of the gods in rituals, religious structures, and social values. Such inventories served as a control mechanism for organising ceremonies, ranking the deities, and ensuring the proper execution of hierarchical and ritual order. With their guiding function, these registers clarify the social duties, religious significance, and cultural roles of the most prominent gods in Ugaritic society. They also assisted the priests of Ugarit by marking which deities were to receive sacrifices, ensuring that no ritual obligation was neglected.

Nevertheless, although many divine names appear in these compilations, numerous local gods are absent. Hence, the preserved records cannot fully capture the diversity of the Ugaritic pantheon. Alongside divine names and attributes, the inclusion of place names is also noteworthy and sometimes debated. As in other Mesopotamian traditions, geographical names could be combined with the names of gods in Ugaritic texts, thereby highlighting the function of local deities. For instance, the mountain of Zaphon is mentioned in three forms: “God of Zaphon Mound,” “Baal Zaphon,” and simply “Zaphon.” Although originally a mountain, Zaphon was also identified with the storm-god who ruled over the region. Such toponyms served to emphasise both the religious and geographical characteristics of the deities. Similarly, the designation “earth and sky” may represent either a divine name or the broader concept of creation and cosmic connection. Other examples include deities explicitly tied to natural functions, such as *Yam*, the god of the sea, and *Yarihu*, the god of the moon. In the case of recurring names like *Baal*, these variations likely reflect shifting divine manifestations, shaped by changing social relations and historical contexts.

List of Ugaritic Gods (KTU 1.118) (Pardee, 2002, p.18)			
	’Iluspn	’Ilu Sapuni	God of Mount Zaphon
1	ilib	’Ilū’ibī	God of the Father
	il	’Ilu	El
	Dgn	Dagan	Dagan
	b’lspn	Ba’lu Sapuni	Baal Zaphon (Baal of Mount Zaphon)
5	b’lm	Ba’luma	Baale (another form of Baal)
	b’lm	Ba’luma	Baale (another form of Baal)
	b’lm	Ba’luma	Baale (another form of Baal)
	b’lm	Ba’luma	Baale (another form of Baal)
	b’lm	Ba’luma	Baale (another form of Baal)
10	b’lm	Ba’luma	Baale (another form of Baal)
	Ars wšmm	’Arsu-wa-Šamūma	Earth and heaven (earth and heaven)
	Ktrt	Kôṭarātu	Goddess of childbirth
	Yrh	Yariḥu	Moon God
	spn	Šapunu	Zaphon
15	ktr	Kôṭaru	Kothar
	Pdry	Pidray	Pidray
	’ttr	’Aṭṭaru	Astar

	grm w('mgt)	Ġūrūma-wa-Tahāmātu	Mountains and Valleys
	(a)trt	'Aṭiratu	Astarte
20	'nt	'Anatu	Anat
	Špš	Šapšu (Sun)	Sun Goddess
	Aršy	'Aršay (Earthly)	Aršay
	Ušḥry	'Ušḥaraya	Ušḥara
	'ttrt	'Aṭtartu	Astarte
25	il t'drb'l	'Ilu Ta'diri Ba'lu	Baal's heper Godds
	R (š)p	Rašap	Rašpu
	Ddmš	Dadmiš	Dadmiš
	Phrilm	Puḥru'llima	Gathering of the gods
	Ym	Yammu	God of the seas
30	utht	'Uṭḥatu	Censer
	Knr	Kinnāru	Lyre
	Mlkm	Malakūma	Kral
	Šlm	Šalimu	Šalim

(Cornelius & Niehr, p. 2004: 43; Pardee, 2002, p. 18-19)

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates philological, historical, and archaeological analyses in examining the attributes of the Ugaritic god El. The primary sources consist of Ugaritic texts, mainly from the Ras Shamra royal palace archives. These include records of sacrifices offered by the royal family, rituals performed by priests, and mythological narratives, which together form the core material of the research. Secondary sources—within the fields of history, epigraphy, and the history of religions—provide the basis for interpretive and comparative analysis. Methodologically, the study evaluates El's role and epithets in the pantheon while also addressing his associations with justice, kingship, and other worldly matters. By combining ancient history and religious history methodologies, the article aims to contribute to scholarly discussions on Ugaritic religion and to fill an academic gap in the study of El's position within the pantheon.

### The God El In Conceptual Framework

El, one of the most important deities of the Ugaritic pantheon, derives from a Semitic term attested throughout Mesopotamia and the Near East, though absent in Ethiopia, and generally meaning "god." Etymologically, the origin of this designation cannot be determined with certainty. In the Ugaritic texts, El is mentioned more than five hundred times and is consistently identified as the father of the gods. He is represented by the figure of the bull, symbolising strength and authority. Aṭhirat, an Assyrian goddess of wealth and vegetation, is presented as El's wife, the mother of their offspring, and the mother goddess of Ugarit (Smith, 2001, p. 135, Kahraman Çinar, 2025: 669). Among the attributes ascribed to El as a Canaanite deity are titles such as "the powerful one," "the mighty one" (Lurker, 2004, p. 56), "the strong one," and "the first one" (Miller, 1967, p. 418). In the Late Bronze Age texts of Ugarit, El appears as "the father of years" ('ab šnm), "the father of the gods" ('ab 'ilm), "the creator of creatures" (bny bnwt), and "the father of mankind" ('ab 'adm). He is also portrayed as a wise deity with a significant cultic role to whom offerings were made (Pope, 1955, p. 17). In the Ugaritic epics, where he is referred to as "the father of mankind," El is invoked to heal diseases and bless children (Lurker, 2004, p. 56). His role as a protective father, who comes to the aid of his children in difficult times and shelters them under his wings, reflects the expectations placed upon him in this capacity. One of his mythological titles is "the one who built his lineage," by which he is acknowledged as

the progenitor of the gods. The texts further include phrases such as “the sons of El,” “the circle of the sons of El,” and “the assembly of the sons of El” (Pardee, 2002, p. 22). Although El is later mentioned in Phoenician and Punic inscriptions as the creator of the world, this attribute does not appear in the Ugaritic sources. In another Ugaritic text, El is associated with “dawn and dusk” (Day, 1986, p. 390). Cuneiform tablets even record the statement: “El’s wives have given birth. / What have they borne? / They have borne Dawn and Dusk” (Pope, 1955, pp. 38–39).

The name of the god El is identical to the word “god” in many Western Semitic languages. This may be taken as evidence that El, as head of the Western Semitic pantheon, was regarded as the “foremost deity” or perhaps as the “incarnate divinity.” The most widely accepted etymology for both the common noun “god” and the proper name “El” derives from *y/wl*, “to be strong” or “to be foremost,” though alternative suggestions have been proposed. The name El appears clearly in personal names first attested at Ebla, and later at Mari and Amarna. In contrast, the evidence for personal names from Mesopotamia is debated, which suggests that in those contexts the word refers to the general term “god” rather than the proper name El. Given the absence of evidence for the cult of El in Mesopotamia, this latter view may be preferable (Smith, 2001, p. 135).

In Ugaritic mythological narratives, El’s role as *’ab* (“father”) applies not only to the gods but also to humanity, marking him as the father of mankind. The pantheon, organised as a royal family, is often described as *dr’il*, usually translated as “El’s circle,” though “El’s family” may be a more accurate rendering. As divine patriarch, El is sometimes called *il yknnh* (“El who created it”). In this capacity, he supervises the actions of the pantheon and exercises decision-making authority in a royal council that includes Aṯḫirat, Baal, and Anat (Smith, 2001, p. 135). His paternal role is further reflected in the epithet “the kind/caring El.” In both texts and iconography, he appears as an elderly, bearded figure. Within the divine council, he is at times portrayed in opposition to other gods, and at other times as “the ageless one” or “the endless one.” His advanced age is also reflected in the title “father of years.” In one Ugaritic text, Aṯḫirat addresses him: “Thou art great, O El, thou art wise. Thy gray beard instructs thee...” (Smith, 2001, p. 136).

As divine authority, El is portrayed with a range of social activities, such as presiding over his own male association or club, roles in which he is likened to the elite men of Ugarit. The texts further mention that El, like human clergy, occasionally suffered from severe intoxication leading to hallucinations, and they also recount his sexual relations with two women. His union with his wife Aṯḫirat is described elsewhere (Smith, 2001, pp. 136–137). El is additionally equated with Kumarbi, the chief god of the Hurrians, a comparison that underscores his precedence and important position within the Ugaritic pantheon, which is largely reflected in his epithets (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 44).

One of the iconographic depictions of El discovered at Ugarit is a small bronze statuette inlaid with gold, found in the southern part of the city. It likely belonged to a jeweller’s house or workshop. The 13,5 cm high figure portrays El as a seated man wearing a beaded skirt and the Atef Crown on his head.

The right hand of the statuette is extended forward in a gesture resembling a blessing, while the left hand holds an object that has not survived (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 44). Another representation of El is a limestone statuette discovered near the Temple of the Rhyton.

The figurine depicts a bearded male seated on a throne, dressed in a beaded cloak and wearing a tall crown. Its eyes and arms, originally fashioned from another material, are now missing. Upon its discovery, researchers immediately interpreted the statuette as an image of the god El. Although this identification has rarely been questioned, it has generally continued to be accepted. However, since the figure lacks horns—or even sockets for them—a more plausible interpretation is that it represents a deified king (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 45).

The 47 cm-high “El Stele,” depicting a worship scene, was discovered in a house on the Acropolis. It portrays a crowned man holding a sacrificial jug and a staff with an animal head, standing in front of a bearded deity enthroned on a stool. The enthroned figure wears a long robe and a horned crown. In his right hand he holds an object variously interpreted as a cup, a flower, or the W-shaped sign of the storm god, while his left hand is raised in a gesture of blessing. Above the scene appears a winged sun, serving as a cosmic symbol. The deity is traditionally identified as El, although Baal or even a deified king have also been

proposed (Cornelius & Niehr, 2004, p. 45). Most of these statues and stelae are thought to be of local manufacture (Fisher, 1965, p. 322).

### Titles Used For God El

#### *El as "Bull"*

The Ugaritic texts do not refer to El as the god of fertility, a role ascribed instead to the chief god Baal (Miller, 1967, p. 418). However, "Bull" is the epithet most frequently applied to El. In the ancient Near East, the title "Bull" carried a dual symbolism. It represented fertility, but also conveyed power, might, and martial courage in both the divine and human realms. Although strength and warrior-like qualities appear to be the primary characteristics of bull imagery, in many cases it simultaneously signified both fertility and might (Miller, 1967, p. 418). The epithet also emphasised El's strength as a leader. In this context, wild cattle and horses were sometimes used almost synonymously (Hanson, 1970, p. 54). In several Ugaritic texts, the bull attribute of El is expressed as follows:

"Surely Bull El, your father, will hear you; Verily he will pull out the supports of your dwelling, Yea overturn the throne of your kingship, Verily he will break the scepter of your dominion. Divine Mot was afraid, Was fearful the beloved of El, the hero" (Miller, 1967, p. 412). In the Ugaritic epic of Kirta/Keret, the epithet "Bull" is reserved for El, as reflected in the following lines:

"Sleep overcomes him and he lies down, / slumber and he curls up. / In a dream El descends, / in a vision, the father of mankind. / He comes near, asking Kirta/ Who is Kirta that he should weep? / Should the shed tears, the goodly lad of El? / Would he request the kingship of the Bull his father, / Or dominion like (that of) the father of mankind?" (Bordreuil & Pardee, 2009, p. 170). Both the father of mankind and the bull are reflected in the epic (Fleming, 1999, p. 24-25).

Elsewhere, the epithet "Bull" is combined with the title "creator of creatures," emphasising continuity in generation and creative power. "May he not, like his brothers, have a son, like his kinsmen, a scion? (For,) girded, he gives the gods food, girded, he gives the Holy Ones drink. O Bull El, my father, please bless him, please work a blessing for him, O creator of creatures, so that he may have a son in his house, a scion within his palace: someone to raise up the stela of his father's god.." (Bordreuil & Pardee, 2009, p. 173).

In another section of the epic, the following lines describe El as the father of humankind (KTU 1.14 I 26–43).

"He entered his chamber and wept, /as he repeated his lamentations, he shed tears. /His tears poured down /like shekels to the ground, /like fifths (shekels) on the bed. /As he wept, he fell asleep, /as he shed tears, there was slumber. /Sleep overcame him and he lay down, /slumber and he crouched down. /And in his dream El descended, /in his vision the father of man./And he approached, asking Kirta:/" What is it with you, Kirta? That he weeps,/sheds tears, the lovely boy of El?/ Does he desire a kingdom (like that of) his father, /or a dominion like that of the father of man? (Niehr, 2019, p. 275).

*As seen in the epic text, El's bull title with father title are intertwined. In other texts, it is emphasised as Surely Bull El, your father, will hear you; Verily he will pull out the supports of your dwelling, Yea overturn the throne of your kingship, Verily he will break the scepter of your dominion'* (Miller, 1967, p. 412).

*In the expression "El's name is ḥātikuka, that is, your ancestor" (Cross, 1997, p. 15), El is explicitly identified as an ancestor, independent of the epithet "Bull." The Ugaritic lists further attest to his wide-ranging roles: "El, god of the fathers"; "El Qarīti, god of the city"; "El M., god of men and women"; "gods of the land of Aleppo"; and "El LB., gods of Labana." These designations emphasise the breadth of El's divinity (Pardee, 2002, pp. 18–19) ...*

While meanings such as strength, leadership, and courage are primarily emphasised, the epithet "Bull" (*tr*) also functioned as a common symbol of male fertility in the Ancient Near East (Pope, 1955, p. 35). In the episode involving El and Aṯhirat, this association with sexual power and fertility is particularly evident. According to the text, El makes a proposal of love to Aṯhirat. After offering polite compliments on El's wisdom, she declines his offer and instead turns to the purpose of her visit. Although El and Aṯhirat appear to be on friendly terms, their marriage seems marked by estrangement. The lines first mention a single

woman as his wife, but later refer to multiple women and the children they bore. At this point, El is portrayed as having more than one wife and is characterised as a “Bull,” highlighting male fertility and sexuality. In the Ugaritic text, the story is narrated as follows.

"[El walks... on the shore of the sea, / and strides the shore of the deep. / ...two torches, / two torches from the top the fire. / Now they are low, now they rise/ Now they cry “Daddy, daddy”, / and now they cry “Mama, mama”. / El's “hand” grows long as sea, / El's “hand” as the flood. / Long is El's “hand” as the sea, / El's “hand” as the flood. / El takes the two torches, / the two torches from the top of the fire/ he takes and puts in his house. / El, his rod sinking. / El, his love-staff droops. / He raises, he shoots skyward. / He shoots a bird in the sky;/ he plucks and puts it on the coals. / El would seduce the woman. / Lot he women exclaim:/ O mate, mate your rod sinks, your love-staff droops. /Now the bird roasts on the fire, / bakes on the coals. / The girl are El's girls, / El's girls and forever. / Lot he woman exclaim: 'O mate, mate, your rod sinks, / Your love-staff droops. Lo, the bird roasts on the fire, / bakes on the coals. / The women are El's wives, / El's wives and forever. /He bends, their lips he kisses, Lo, their lips are sweet, seet as grapes. As he kisses, they conceive;/ As he embraces, they conceive. / they travail and give birth / In Dawn and Dusk. / Word is brought to El:/ ‘El's wives have given birth.’/ ‘What have they borne? / ‘They have borne Dawn and Dusk.’ (Marvin H. Pope, 1955, p. 37-39)

Where the Ugaritic words for “bull” and “buffalo” are used descriptively or comparatively, they convey not only associations with fertility but also an emphasis on strength, as in the lines cited above. Another Ugaritic text provides the following description of the offspring of Athirat's maid: ‘They had horns like a bull and hump like a buffalo and the face of Baal on them.’<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this description appears to be the emphasis on the horror and might of these beings, since horns and humps functioned as established symbols of power and fertility.

### *El as King (mlk)*

Another epithet encountered in the Ugaritic texts is *King (mlk)*, which evolved into a specific title attributed to El. It appears to have been particularly associated with him, if not exclusively his (Hanson, 1970, p. 23). In these texts, El is neither depicted as a fierce warrior nor characterised by combative actions, and this trait is reflected in his epithets. While emphasised as the “father of creatures,” he is also portrayed as a king enthroned and blessing creation. Moreover, El's royal role extends to responsibility for weather, underscoring his function as protector of the city and the kingdom (Pardee, 2014, p. 288). The assembly of the gods takes place upon a mountain, and El's name even appears in the expression “the stars of God.” Regarding his dwelling place, Ugaritic texts describe it as “at the source of the rivers, in the midst of the double deep of the rivers, in the heart of the seas” (Day, 2002, p. 25; Lurker, 2004, p. 56).

The portrayal of the king as powerful and authoritative, together with the use of animal symbolism, creates a semantic pattern in which each attribute reinforces the other. In Ugaritic texts, such epithets are not employed in isolation but are interwoven, as illustrated in the expressions:

*“...just as El, the chief and strongest of the animals, is the chief of the gods...”* (Smith, 2001, p. 135),

and

*“Bull El, his father / El the king who created him”* (Cross, 1997, p. 15). These examples demonstrate how the epithets are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

### *El as Wise God*

El, as creator, establisher, and protector of order, is also the only deity explicitly referred to as “wise” among the gods (Greenstein, 1984, p. 77). Although wisdom is generally regarded as a symbolic attribute of divinity, in the Ugaritic texts this quality is uniquely and exclusively applied to El. The epithet of wisdom

<sup>1</sup> Ramses II, in his poem on the battle of Kadesh, says: “When the earth was illuminated, I organized the battle ranks, I prepared for battle like a bull, I came out against them like Montu, I was adorned with the ornaments of valor and might, and I plunged into the midst of the battle as a falcon strikes.” These expressions, “the victorious bull” or “the mighty bull”, frequently used for Pharaoh, are further evidence of the animal's use as a symbol of power, warrior courage or valor. (Miller, 1967, p. 424)

belongs solely to him and distinguishes his character. El is depicted fulfilling the requests of Anat and Aṭhirat, and is invoked in prayer for his wisdom, as in the following passage:

*“El, by your wisdom, a life filled with eternity and good fortune is under your command.”*  
(Hanson, 1970, p. 62).

Moreover, in another text, Aṭhirat’s statement—“your grey beard guides you”—directly emphasizes El’s advanced age and wisdom (Hanson, 1970, p. 63). In Ugaritic texts, El is frequently referred to with epithets such as “Father of Years,” “the Ancient One,” or “the Eternal” (Cross, 1997, p. 16). These descriptions suggest a form of wisdom that encompasses age, life experience, and perhaps a heightened awareness or gnosis associated with maturity (Day, 2002, p. 17). One passage reads: “Your decision is wise, / Wise unto eternity, / A life of fortune is your decree... You are great, O El, truly you are wise, / Your age-old beard teaches you...” (Cross, 1997, p. 16).

Moreover, in another text, Aṭhirat’s statement—“*your grey beard guides you*”—explicitly emphasises El’s advanced age and wisdom (Hanson, 1970, p. 63). In the Ugaritic corpus, El is frequently invoked with epithets such as “Father of Years,” “the Ancient One,” and “the Eternal” (Cross, 1997, p. 16). These designations present wisdom as inseparable from age, life experience, and a heightened awareness associated with maturity (Day, 2002, p. 17). One passage illustrates this theme: “El sits on the throne with Attart of the fields: / El sits as judge with the shepherd Haddu, / Singing and playing the lyre” (Cross, 1997, p. 14).

### ***El as Kind/Compassionate God***

The epithet *ltp* used for El has been translated as “kind” or “compassionate.” Pope suggests rendering it as “one with a fatherly, affectionate heart.” Another term associated with El, *pid*, has been translated as “heart, mind, intellect, kindness, or gentleness.” The expression *pid*—often rendered as “compassionate El” or “god of mercy”—appears frequently in the epic texts and is applied exclusively to El..

Lokkegaard highlights the significance of references to El’s mercy and the attribution to him of the quality of *ḥilm*, regarded by the Arabs as the highest virtue and the defining attribute of a ruler (Lokkegaard, 1953, p. 232; Hanson, 1970, p. 68). Yet the association of compassion and tenderness with old age made this quality vulnerable to being perceived as a weakness, since mercy and goodness were not easily reconciled with the image of a god characterised by the epithet “Bull.” In this sense, El appears as an aged bull, yet not particularly vigorous (Hanson, 1970, p. 68).

To appreciate this fully, it is essential to understand the conceptual framework of the Arabic term *ḥilm*. In Arabic, *ḥilm* is considered the direct antithesis of *jahl* (“ignorance”) and refers to the moral strength of a person capable of restraining impulsive outbursts rooted in an ignorant temperament. A *ḥalīm* person curbs emotions, overcomes blind passions, and maintains composure regardless of circumstances. This virtue denotes the ability to withstand seductive desires and anger while preserving self-control and temperance. While such descriptions might misleadingly suggest passivity, *ḥilm* is in fact an active and positive spiritual force. It empowers individuals to suppress overwhelming desires and rage, reflecting superior intellect and elevated moral character (Izutsu, p. 260). Crucially, *ḥilm* cannot exist without strength and reason. It is a virtue proper to rulers, not to the ruled. A naturally weak and powerless person, however calm in the face of provocation, cannot be described as *ḥalīm*—such behaviour indicates mere weakness. By contrast, a truly *ḥalīm* individual possesses the power to act but deliberately chooses not to misuse it. Thus, *ḥilm* embodies self-restraint in the presence of power: the quality of one who pardons an enemy and behaves graciously toward the weak while holding a position of strength.

As a deity, it is plausible to interpret El through the attribute of *ḥilm*. Pope, however, offers a different view, suggesting that El’s *ḥilm* may not denote a moral quality but rather traits of irritability or even cowardice (Hanson, 1970, pp. 67–68). Nevertheless, when considered alongside the epithets “Bull,” “Father,” “Ancestor,” and “King,” the claim that El’s mercy derives from weakness remains debatable. Moreover, the epithet “Gracious God,” frequently emphasised in relation to El, points to comparable qualities and underscores the importance of divine freedom in this regard (Day, 2002, p. 265). In the cuneiform texts, El’s compassionate nature is further reflected in passages such as the following: “*El is*

*magnanimous, /El is concerned, / El is merciful, / Ammu returned;/ El is magnanimous, ...El is concerned, /. El is merciful...* (Pardee, 2002, p.21).

*"El, the sons of El, / The circle of the sons of El, / The assembly of the sons of El's / Tukamuna-wa-Šunama; / El and Atiratu; / The grace of El, / The solidity of El, / teh well-being of El; / solicitous El, active El; / Balu of Sapunu, Balu / of Ugarit; / By El's blade, / By El's axe, / Under El's yoke, / By El's crusher, / By El's fire, / By El's foundation, / by El's care / did El build..."* (Pardee, 2002, 22).

Eliade observes the paradoxical character of El, noting: "Despite being introduced with epithets such as 'Lord of the Earth' and his name always appearing at the top of sacrificial ritual lists, El appears in the myths as physically weak, indecisive, elderly, and resigned to what is to come. Some gods treat him with contempt. Baal, for instance, takes away El's two wives, Asherah and Anat. Nevertheless, alongside many exalted epithets attributed to him, it must be concluded that El reflects a period in which he truly was the leader of the pantheon." (Eliade & Berkday, 2016, p. 187).

## Conclusion

As one of the most important figures of the Ugaritic pantheon, the god El possesses both theological and mythological significance. Although the name *El* derives from a generic term meaning "god" within the Semitic language family, in the Ugaritic tradition it was transformed into a specific being, a divine figure defined as the founder of order, the father of the gods, and the representative of power. All the attributes and character traits associated with El, as well as his mythological roles, are crucial for understanding his central position within the cult. These qualities are frequently attested in mythological narratives that emphasise El's authority in the pantheon and his creative powers expressed through sexuality. Nevertheless, he is not portrayed as a fertility deity, but rather as a figure of leadership and authority. In this context, El's bull symbolism reinforces both his authority and patriarchal role within the divine assembly, as attested in the cuneiform texts.

Another defining feature of El in Ugaritic mythology is his position as the protector of both humanity and the gods, reflected in the epithet "father of all creation." This role is reinforced by his portrayal as a wise and elderly figure in mythological narratives. The emphasis on justice in his titles of "king" and "judge" reflects his responsibility for maintaining order within the pantheon. The intertwining of these attributes illustrates that El was idealised as a father figure not only for the gods but also for Ugaritic society as a whole.

El's cult, iconographic representations, and sexual symbolism in mythological narratives ensured that he was perceived not only as the leader of the pantheon, but also as the sustainer of divine order and creation. His association with the figures of dawn and dusk in Ugaritic texts demonstrates that he was regarded as both a creative and organising force. These narratives suggest that El acquired a complex divine identity, combining authority over gods and humans with roles tied to fertility, continuity, and the cyclical renewal of life.

In conclusion, El is not only a god figure within the Ugaritic pantheon but also a symbol of religious, mythological, and social order. His attributes of "Bull," "Father," "King," "Wise," "Judge," and "Sage" embody both individual and collective dimensions of divine authority and serve as a reflection of the expectations placed upon leadership within Ugaritic society. In this respect, the figure of El highlights the intricate relationship between theology, kingship, and social order in the Late Bronze Age Levant. Moreover, by analysing the epithets of El through philological, historical, and iconographic evidence, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Ugaritic religion and fills a gap in the scholarly literature on West Semitic traditions. Ultimately, El emerges not only as the central deity of Ugarit but also as a paradigmatic figure within the wider Semitic world, embodying the divine ideals of power, justice, wisdom, and compassion.

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## Figures



**Fig. 1:** God El Figurine



**Fig. 2:** God El Figurine



**Fig. 3:** God El Figurine